



## Potential Partnerships: Progressive Criminology, Grassroots Organizations and Social Justice

**Tim Goddard**

Florida International University, USA

**Randolph R Myers**

Old Dominion University, USA

**Kaitlyn J Robison**

Old Dominion University, USA

### Abstract

Criminologists around the globe are writing about the disproportionate criminalization of minority groups and – in the US in particular – about racial disproportionality in all aspects of the criminal justice system. This wealth of knowledge in progressive criminology rarely animates reform efforts: it has had little impact on formal policymaking, and has failed to animate the work of grassroots activists engaged in the fight for justice system reform. Yet given the increased criminalization of young people in poor communities – and the possibilities for change at this very moment – progressive criminological ideas have never been more important. We need to think about ways to make them public. Toward this end, this paper discusses possible partnerships between progressive criminology and social justice organizations struggling to transform the criminal justice system. While describing nine such groups, we detail a set of recommendations for bridging the gap between progressive criminology and social justice organizations.

### Keywords

Social justice; progressive criminology; community-based grassroots organizations; protests; criminology activism.

### Protests and activist criminology

In late 2014, a national conversation in the US developed around police violence, racial disproportionality in incarceration, and the racialized consequences of mass incarceration – and people have taken to the streets demanding change. Ignited by specific acts of police violence towards young people of color, protests erupted in several US cities, including New York, St Louis, and Los Angeles and, most recently, in Baltimore, Maryland, where the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray from spinal injuries sustained while in police custody ignited widespread protests across the city. The protests, sit-ins, die-ins, and the like are demanding reform of the

US criminal justice system and reintroducing calls to eradicate various social inequalities and upend institutionalized racism. As these events unfold, people around the world are not only learning more about the social and human consequences of the US criminal justice system but also recognizing similar disparities (and counter-movements) in their own countries (Palet 2015).

Although most major media outlets framed the US protests as sudden, years of activism by community-based organizations and coalitions helped lay the groundwork for them. Progressive and critical criminologists need to better understand these organizations, in part because they provide a way to engage with today's possibilities for change. While notable exceptions exist, for the most part, the ideas of progressive criminology rarely influence the policymaking process and rarely, if ever, do activists draw on progressive criminology or work directly with progressive criminologists. In her 2014 Presidential Address to the American Society of Criminology, Joanne Belknap spoke to the consequences of our sitting on the sidelines:

If criminologists are unwilling to become more committed to activism and dedicated to changing these practices and policies, we can expect continuing and alarming ineffectiveness in deterring offending and incarceration. Indeed, we can expect a backfiring of our stated efforts and, in short, we are falling down on the job. (Belknap 2015: 2)

We find this and similar arguments compelling (see also Currie 2007; Uggen and Inderbitzin 2010). And we see working more closely with social justice organizations – which are protesting the same subjects many of us teach and write about – as one way for progressive criminology to engage with the important changes that need to be made. In this article we describe the programs and organizing efforts of nine social justice organizations working to bring consciousness to these issues, often by mobilizing young people to become advocates for changing this system as well as designing and implementing less harmful alternatives to justice as usual for young people in the US. We highlight the many intersections with critical and progressive criminology and detail specific ways that criminologists with progressive values might align themselves with like-minded folks pursuing social justice in the community.

### **Racial disparities in the US criminal justice system: A review of the injustices**

Before describing the sample of social justice organizations, we review the injustices they are working to eliminate. As is well known, the US leads the world in incarceration. The US correctional system houses 2.4 million inmates on any given day, a population that is roughly the size of the fifth largest US city, Houston, Texas. When you add the number of people on probation and parole to those behind bars, the US correctional population stands at roughly 7 million (Glaze and Kaeble 2014). At just over 700 per 100,000, the US rate of imprisonment is roughly 4.5 times that of England and Wales and 5.5 times that of Australia (Walmsley 2013). However, this does not suggest that these countries' criminal justice systems are race-neutral, an issue we touch on below.

The swelling of the US system over the last 40 years is due, almost entirely, to an increased rate of incarceration for people of color, mainly for drug-related offenses (Alexander 2010). For young men of color with little education, the prison has become a normal social experience, statistically speaking (Western 2006). Mass incarceration appears to be with us for years to come as well: while the US prison population recently experienced a slight downtick, estimates suggest that the US carceral system will be larger in 2018 than today (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2014). This means that, for the foreseeable future, a prison term will serve as a common rite of passage for poor young men of color (Comfort 2012), an experience that forever dims

their life prospects and curtails those of their neighbors, partners, brothers, sisters and children, perhaps for generations to come (Clear 2007; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011).

Research on US policing practices helps us understand why so many young men of color are under US correctional control and why communities of color are protesting so vehemently against them. As a direct consequence of the policies and practices of the US 'War on Drugs', young Black males are disproportionately targeted, arrested, and prosecuted for drug offenses (Alexander 2010; Provine 2011; Western 2006) even though Black youth are less likely than White youth to use drugs and alcohol illegally (Felson and Kreager 2015). In addition to this, research on racial profiling and the practice of stop, question, and frisk shows that police disproportionately stop Black people, frisk them more, and use force against them more often (Tonry 2011). Still, if the arrests are more productive at finding guns or drugs, then maybe this suggests that racial profiling is at least 'functionally' appropriate. The opposite is the case, however: Blacks are less likely to possess guns or drugs than Whites when stopped (Tonry 2011). Alarmingly, we are learning more and more about the psychological consequences of this racialized policing: the more police stops an individual endures, the more trauma and anxiety symptoms experienced by that person (Geller, Fagan, Tyler and Link 2014). In addition to being stopped more often, in many communities, police encounters are more violent for black people than for Whites and other racial groups as police shoot and kill a disproportionate number of ethnic and racial minorities (Department of Justice 2015).

The disparities do not end with police practices. Once arrested, prosecutors are less likely to grant people of color pretrial diversion, counseling or programming than Whites with similar legal characteristics (Schlesinger 2013). This matters because pretrial diversion channels criminal defendants out of the criminal-legal net and away from the stigma of a criminal record (Pager 2007). The disparities do not end there, however. Once charged, Blacks are more likely to be punished than Whites. Particularly among men convicted of drug crimes – but also among men convicted of property crimes – mandatory terms and sentencing enhancements disproportionately increase Black men's prison sentences (Schlesinger 2011). Even after controlling for past criminal record and other pertinent variables, the chances of a severe legal sanction remain 42 per cent higher for a Black defendant (Stolzenberg, D'Alessio and Eitle 2013). The same disparities can be seen with youth. For instance, a recent study found that, irrespective of the self-reported delinquency, Black youth were more likely to be placed in a correctional institution than White youth (Stevens and Morash 2015).

Compounding these disparities in the criminal and juvenile justice systems is the fact that criminal justice tools and logics guide school discipline practices in the US (Simon 2007). The use of surveillance, partnerships with law enforcement, and implementation of zero-tolerance policies illustrates the pervasiveness of this model (Hirschfield 2008), one that directly and indirectly places students at increased risk for incarceration. The consequences under zero-tolerance schemes can include immediate police intervention as well as mandatory suspensions or expulsions (Hirschfield 2008; Simon 2007). Racial disparities in who enters the school-to-prison pipeline echo those of the prison system: students of color are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014).

The punitive turn has occurred in the context of worsening social and economic inequalities and the dismantlement of state supports under neoliberalism (Massey 2007; Soss, Fording and Schram 2011). Youth employment rates in the US have steadily fallen over the last fifty years, reaching their lowest level since World War II in 2011 (Smith et al. 2012). While a universal decline in youth employment is occurring in the US, inner-city communities are facing a job-shortage crisis, with one out of four Black and one out of six Latino working-age youth unemployed (Jones 2014). The work that is available in the post-industrial US labor market is often short-term and precarious in nature, especially for young people who lack a college degree

(Smith et al. 2012; Standing 2011). Moreover, even these precarious jobs are becoming more competitive: more qualified older workers increasingly beat out younger, less-skilled workers for the entry-level service jobs that once served as an entry point to the US labor market (Smith et al. 2012). While some public job training programs for vulnerable young people exist (Harris and Bird 2012), the US lags behind other countries in providing job training and employment programs to young people disconnected from the labor market (Currie 2013a).

The lack of family-friendly policies intensifies the consequences of this shortage of stable, rewarding and meaningful work in the US. The US is one of the few countries that does not require employers to guarantee paid maternity leave, nor must employers allow workers to adjust their working hours around their families (Lovell 2007). In total, 22 million working women do not have paid sick days (Lovell 2007). In these situations, a working mother must choose between her health (or that of her child) and her job. In the event that a parent must choose work, ideally, other mechanisms of support and supervision would be in place to care for their children, such as after-school programs. This is not always the case, especially in poor communities. While after school programs serving privileged communities can rely on the fees collected from participants, those in poor communities cannot, and these organizations must invest much time and effort fighting for limited funds from a wide variety of public and private sources (Gardner, Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2009). The fractured social ecology of support in the US changes what it means to draw a small wage, compounding the stresses and strains associated with low-wage work in ways that matter for violence (Currie 2013a).

Mass incarceration worsens these already troubling inequalities, many of which are gendered. For the increasing number of women – disproportionately women of color – who experience the US prison system, this criminalization often disqualifies them from accessing public services such as public housing, a collateral consequence that further exposes women to the gendered violence that occurs at alarming rates in marginalized US communities (Richie 2012). Although some recent policy attention has focused on improving and expanding services to incarcerated women, many of these ‘gender specific’ services during and after incarceration are narrow individualized interventions grounded in behaviorist-psychology, which fail to grapple with the material deprivations women in crime so often face (Myers 2013; Sered and Norton Hawk 2014). While research shows that well-planned and coordinated service provisions can make a real difference for women returning home from prison (Belknap 2014), recent qualitative work reveals how the reality of governmental support for reentering women is often made up of stingy, short-term and contingent variants of support: stop-gap measures which do little to help women stay sober, keep custody of their children, and stay out of the criminal legal system (Sered and Norton-Hawk 2014). It is poor women of color who are disproportionately exposed to this self-defeating system (Richie 2012), meaning that the gendered ripple effects of inadequate services for returning women will disproportionately affect their families and their communities for years and decades to come.

More generally, mass incarceration means that the human capital of young people born into poor communities of color goes underdeveloped: due to the physical separation that comes with a prison stay, and the ways in which a prison record cuts-off the life chances of adults who might otherwise play active roles in children’s lives, mass incarceration makes for fewer adults capable of bringing out the latent skills, talents and aptitudes of children born into carceral hot-spots (Clear 2007). Incarceration lowers the levels of social capital for all young people living in hot spots of incarceration, as ex-prisoners who cannot participate fully in social and economic life now dot their social networks (Alexander 2010; Clear 2007). Moreover, the majority of the men and women cycling through the US prison system are parents (Mumola 2000). For the approximately three million children with a parent in prison, this experience truncates their life chances in subtle and not so subtle ways (Travis, Western and Redburn 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011). Because its effects stretch across multiple social institutions, compounding and exacerbating other social ills, the US prison system now stands beside the labor market and

the education system as an important stratifying institution in US society (Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

### **Ending mass incarceration and its racial disparities**

Clearly, significant social and criminal justice system changes are necessary, and the scholarship outlined above highlights the patterned nature of these problems. This scholarship, however, has not been enough to activate significant changes: historically it is grassroots activism that is needed (Alexander 2010; Gilmore 2007). At this moment, in many urban US cities, activism and mobilization is taking place; unfortunately, this activism lacks support from the 'knowledge that we have found in our own research' (Belknap 2015: 4). This does not seem like a good thing. Grassroots social justice organizations working in communities most affected by these issues have designed original and historically informed ways to combat the causes and consequences of mass incarceration. The policy changes advocated for by these organizations are more wide-ranging than the technical solutions put forward by much of administrative criminology, and the programs they are implementing more ambitious than the individualized focus of most 'what works' interventions. These organizations advocate for the sort of broader policy changes and creative interventions progressive and critical criminologists also advocate for, including not just different and 'better' social control policies, but less criminalization. But despite being in operation for a decade or more, their presence has gone largely unnoticed by progressive criminologists. To correct this oversight and remediate this lack of engagement, in what follows, we provide descriptions of nine organizations in three different categories, while offering specific ideas about how progressive criminologists might learn from and partner with these groups.

### **Activist social justice organizations**

One variety of social justice organization works to build social movements against tough-on-crime practices. Organizations of this kind campaign against a wide range of policies, including: the presence of police in schools; the lack of due process for youth placed on gang watch lists; and the construction of new jails. Some organizations hold rallies in favor of justice reinvestment and immigration reform, with the youth doing the campaign work in many of these organizations. While some activist organizations partner with the state or philanthropies to deliver various 'services' to youth, advocacy and organizing work is at the core of what they do.

#### *Sistas and Brothas United*

Founded in the late 1990's, Sistas and Brothas United's mission is to empower youth from low and moderate-income communities in the Northwest Bronx area of New York. Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) focuses on educational justice, employment opportunities, and increasing the availability of community-based resources. It offers leadership training where youth learn to plan meetings, speak at public events, and interact with public officials. In a joint campaign with the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, Sistas and Brothas United succeeded in reducing overcrowding, increasing community engagement, and modifying zero-tolerance policies in local schools. By holding politicians accountable for things such as deteriorating school conditions, members of SBU send a powerful message about the dangers of 'investing' in incarceration and police surveillance instead of education.

#### *Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children*

The New Orleans-based Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Youth (FFLIC) emerged in 2000 in response to the growing outrage and fear of parents with children in the juvenile justice system. FFLIC members include youth with experience in the juvenile justice system and their families who fight for juvenile justice reform and the promotion of more nurturing and rehabilitative practices. FFLIC also strives to give parents a voice in the juvenile justice process, working at both the local level by engaging in education, community building,



and leadership development as well as leading statewide campaigns for reform. In recent years, FFLIC helped push through the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003, led the charge against closing the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth, and lobbied for a reevaluation of state statutes on school discipline.

#### *Youth Justice Coalition*

Founded in Los Angeles in 2003, the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) works to end race, class, and gender inequality throughout California's juvenile justice system. It brings together youth, family, and ex-offenders to fight against racial profiling, police brutality, violation of rights, and the school to prison pipeline. Some of the youth have been incarcerated in locked juvenile facilities or on formal probation, while others have been pushed out of mainstream schools or had a parent in the justice system. Through its work, YJC won a moratorium on Los Angeles county probation's practice of charging families up to \$25 a day during their child's stay in juvenile hall/camp, and won opportunities for education, registration, and absentee voting from within the walls of the Los Angeles County juvenile halls and youth prison facilities. It also worked with the Dignity in Schools campaign, and has reduced youth detention and incarceration in Los Angeles by 50 per cent.

While we detail only three organizations here, many more organizations like this exist in the USA: for example, School of Unity and Liberation (Oakland, California), Seattle Community Justice Program (Seattle, Washington), SouthWest Organizing Project (Albuquerque, New Mexico), Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (Boston), Teen Empowerment (Boston), DRUM—South Asian Organizing Center (New York), FIERCE (New York), Ya-Ya Network (New York), Youth Ministries for Peace & Justice (New York), Southern Echo (Jackson, Mississippi), and Project South—Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide (Atlanta, Georgia).

Organizations of this kind work to harness the energies and anger that many young people feel towards the US criminal legal system (and mainstream American institutions generally). If un-harnessed, this energy is likely to dissolve. Alternatively, it could metastasize: this discontent and resentment could morph from civil disobedience and peaceful protest into outright violence, aimed at police or other citizens. Thinking beyond the current protests in St Louis, New York and other cities, in the longer term, these sorts of organizations are important because they build a generation of young leaders, who come from communities most affected by issues of crime and punishment.

By casting light on how criminal justice furthers racial injustice, documenting the impact of criminalization and mass incarceration on youth of color and their communities, and establishing responses to crime and delinquency outside of the carceral state, activist social justice organizations work for just the sort of changes that progressive criminologists write and teach about. Of course, there is variation in philosophy and focus. Similar to the spectrum of politics in critical and progressive criminology, these organizations range from left-liberal to radical in their approach: that is, some focus on reform and brokering with the state, while others look to build community-based responses outside of the state and untethered from elite philanthropies. Regardless, these organizations *put into practice* many of the values that progressive and radical scholars care about.

Progressive criminology excels at uncovering social harm but rarely works to redress social injustice (Uggen and Inderbitzin 2010). How then might critical and progressive scholars partner with these organizations? As others have suggested, scholars should conduct research alongside community-based groups or do service-learning projects (Aminzade 2004). Both methods appear ripe for expanding the (much needed) public criminology agenda. A more immediate way to align with these groups would be to distill and disseminate cutting edge research. However, scholars must ask what new empirical support would benefit a local

organization and not assume we know what they need. Related to this, this translation of research should *not* be thought of as guiding or ‘educating’ organizations and communities, but supportive of their community-led actions. Organizations not only organize campaign plans and strategies, but also conduct their own research, publish reports, and teach about historical and contemporary injustices and popular mobilizations against them. Organizations and activists do not require lessons from us, but some might benefit from additional empirical support to augment their own knowledge base and contextualize their personal and professional experiences. The website of one organization illustrates well our note of caution:

Most research is conducted from the protection and isolation of a university tower, science laboratory, or corporate boardroom. Real Search takes those of us in the community out from under the microscope. Beyond the role of storyteller, we are claiming our rights as researchers, analysts, problem solvers, and the architects of programs and public policy. (Youth Justice Coalition 2015)

Thus, in working with these groups, the goal must not be to replace their knowledge with our own: instead, we recommend that we allow organizations to integrate our reviews with their own knowledge, experiences, and solutions. Moreover, much can be learned by criminologists from them, not just as research participants, but as experts in the field working on the front lines. Their solutions, however big or small, are tested and being tested – and they are putting themselves on the line, and this must be respected. Our involvement, whatever form it takes, must not reproduce structural inequalities or colonize knowledge production.

### **Program and service delivery social justice organizations**

Another variety of social justice organization works to prevent youth and gang violence from occurring, intervenes on harmful behavior, and reintegrates young offenders back into the community through designing and implementing programs. Organizations of this type (loosely categorized) may be involved in advocacy efforts and, in fact, if they were not advocates for youth they would not be included in our purposive sample. Organizations of this type often partner with state and philanthropic funders to deliver extensive services; however, their programs are often centered on the concept of ‘consciousness’: ‘the understanding that their troubles and frustrations have causes outside themselves – that they are rooted in the systemic injustices and deprivations that are inflicted on them by the society around them’ (Currie 2013b: 6). In contrast to the approaches characteristic of the ‘evidence-based’ movement, the programs of social justice organizations are often developed in tandem with the youth (or at least are subject to youth input); thus they take seriously the importance of Indigenous youth knowledge for crafting justice and social policy (Cunneen and Rowe 2014).

#### *Chicago Freedom School*

Inspired by the original Freedom Schools of the US Civil Rights Movement, Chicago Freedom School (CFS) is a non-profit organization founded in 2007. Chicago Freedom School works with youth aged 14-21 years across Chicago; the youth are the leaders and the adults are the allies/supporters. CFS encourages youth to analyze their personal experiences in the context of the larger social structure. It aims to promote civic engagement, leadership skills, and knowledge about past social movements as well as the space to strategize about future movements. Chicago Freedom School offers multiple programs, including: the Freedom Fellowship, a six-month program where participants partake in the Summer Leadership Institute; youth led campaigns with support from adult allies; training sessions on anti-oppression, leadership and identity, and racial justice; and REV Up, a four day training institute for youth organizers, youth workers, and educators that focuses on how to incorporate discussions of social change into their work.

*Center for Young Women's Development*

The San Francisco-based Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD) was founded in 1993. As the population of women involved with the justice system continues to swell due primarily to the War on Drugs and feminization of poverty, CYWD serves marginalized young women in San Francisco, specifically those with experience working in the street economies or who are under the control of the juvenile justice system. It is one of the first non-profits run and led solely by and for women with experience in the justice system. The organization operates several programs. In the 'Sisters Rising' program, CYWD hires young women to conduct participatory action research to allow young women who have been involved in the juvenile justice system and/or underground street economy to define and find solutions to the issues they are facing, and then take action to implement change in their own lives and the lives of other young women. Young women develop job skills while receiving a wage, healthcare benefits, childcare, housing assistance, and leadership opportunities. In addition to its work in the community, CYWD conducts three-month long workshops in a local juvenile detention center, using a curriculum entitled 'Lift Us Up, Don't Lock Us Down'.

*United Playaz*

United Playaz (UP) is a youth justice and violence prevention organization based in San Francisco. It works with hard to reach youth, such as those who have been in contact with the juvenile justice system, have high rates of truancy, and/or have low academic performance. The program is primarily in the hands of the youth: they plan and execute the outreach, education, recruitment, and advocacy activities with guidance from adult staff. UP provides violence prevention services and support in seven high schools throughout San Francisco. In addition to the work done in schools, the UP Clubhouse serves as an after-school program for 75 youth a day. Here, youth can access tutoring, life skills training, recreational activities, and summertime fieldtrips. UP staff frequently transport youth from local schools back to the Clubhouse. UP provides youth with work and school referrals, and offers assistance in applying for jobs and filling out college applications.

As with the activist social justice organizations, there are many more organizations working in the US that would fit this type. For instance, Homies Unidos (Los Angeles), Pico Youth & Family Center (Santa Monica, California), Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth (San Francisco), and the Seattle Young People's Project (Seattle, Washington). These organizations design and implement programs animated by social justice values, thus putting into practice the implications of critical scholarship. While many mainstream criminologists in the US devote their careers to program development and evaluation, progressive criminologists remain relatively silent on what less harmful approaches to youth crime prevention and intervention ought to look like, or how the success of these programs ought to be measured (Currie 2013b). Although many (though certainly not all) of these organizations frame their work as 'crime prevention' or 'rehabilitation', rather than partnering with criminologists, organizations work with scholars in youth development, education and social work, and other disciplines with traditions of scholar-activist projects that take seriously the considerable knowledge base of community-based organizations and other so-called 'non-experts'.

Criminologists could benefit these organizations in multiple ways. In order for them to compete for the grants and contracts under neoliberal social service arrangements, organizations must, increasingly, prove their programs 'work'. In addition to evaluation, criminologists could help organizations articulate how their programs (often) fall in line with sociological theories of crime. While this might not meet the level of rigor required by some funders, that some are at least 'research supported' may help them compete for the funding needed to survive in the neoliberal social service market.



Borrowing from disciplines like education and youth development, criminologists could work with organizations on 'action-projects', which benefit both sides. This could include evaluating a program's effectiveness, assisting with program design, or simply helping organizations articulate what they are already doing in academic terms. Many social justice-oriented organizations (especially service-oriented ones) want to prove their program 'works'. Without such 'proof' they might be compelled to implement an evidence-based, off-the-shelf approach instead. Many organizations believe their programs do in fact 'prevent crime' and improve the lives of young people in other ways; many are eager to be evaluated on their outcomes rather than be judged on outputs: that is, the extent to which they adhere to a prescribed 'proven' program model. At the same time, many are frustrated at how success is measured, especially since the outcomes that matter are short-term and negative (a reduction in recidivism after x number of months). Action-projects with progressive criminologists may allow these sorts of organizations a chance to prove they work, and give criminologists a chance to think-through how success could be measured in broader, more positive ways.

### **Advocacy and policymaking organizations**

In addition to the activist and program/service delivery social justice organizations, other organizations primarily engage in advocacy and policymaking, often partnering with social justice organizations like those above. These organizations coordinate the actions of activist-oriented community-based organizations. They might, for instance, coordinate trips by multiple organizations to a state capitol in order to support or oppose a particular piece of legislation. Or they may work with their community-based partners to collect data and craft research reports to be distributed to lawmakers or the general public. These organizations often serve, in a way, as umbrella organizations that bridge grassroots groups working on related issues across a given city or state, or even across the nation. Through this work, organizations create opportunities for youth activists and their adult allies to meet with and learn from others working on similar issues in different areas. In addition to helping organize and coordinate specific grassroots protests, they often bring the voices and viewpoints of grassroots organizations directly to the offices of lawmakers.

#### *Dignity in Schools Campaign*

Started in 2006 in New York, the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) works to prevent 'school pushout' by reforming or eliminating policies that make it difficult for children to succeed in school. Such factors include the failure to provide children with everything necessary to receive a high quality education, lack of stakeholder participation in decision-making, the over-reliance on and unequal application of zero-tolerance policies, over-reliance on police-oriented tactics for discipline, and the structural racism inherent in the education system. With a chapter in New York and another in Los Angeles, the DSC does not work directly with educating and training youth: rather, it connects multiple grassroots organizations that share the goal of reforming the school system and reducing the number of children caught up in the justice system.

#### *The Ella Baker Center for Civil Rights*

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC) organizes on a number of issues in California, including ending mass incarceration, eliminating climate change/pollution, and stimulating local economies. Based in Oakland, California, the EBC is unique in that it is involved in local, state-level, and national campaigns. The EBC spearheaded a national community-based research project, 'Toward a Caring Economy', which explored the experiences of families who have endured incarceration by collecting original data. The EBC has worked to close youth prisons, stop prison privatization, and jump-start the green collar jobs movement.

#### *Justice for Families*

Justice for Families (J4F) brings families affected by the juvenile justice system together to advocate for justice reinvestment. Rather than working directly with youth, J4F is a national

alliance of local organizations working to transform the juvenile justice system so that families are more involved in the decision-making process and to reinvest in proactive services rather than reactive youth incarceration. J4F helped to close Tallulah, in the state of Louisiana, one of the nation's most troubled youth prisons, and helped in passing the *Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003*. Families are often locked out of the juvenile justice process; thus J4F guides them through each step and acts on their behalf. While some programs tend to look at the family as the problem, Justice for Families sees the family as the *solution*.

Organizations of this type work to eradicate tough on crime policies, and champion the need for doing something productive and life affirming with those funds instead. Again, there are many more organizations like this that do reform work through state and federal channels, media campaigns, disseminating research and policy issues, or mobilizing marches. For example, the Advancement Project (Headquarters in Los Angeles), All of Us or None (Headquarters in San Francisco), Critical Resistance (Headquarters in Oakland, California), the DataCenter—Research For Justice (Oakland, California), Texas Families of Incarcerated Youth (Houston, Texas), Project NIA (Chicago), Citizens for Juvenile Justice (Boston), JustLeadershipUSA, (Headquarters in New York), Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (New York), Community Connections for Youth (New York), Center for Community Alternatives (New York), Human Rights Coalition (Philadelphia), and Campaign for Youth Justice (Washington DC). Despite the similarities of reform work and grassroots campaigning, this variety of social justice organization has vastly different perspectives on the causes of crime and the reforms needed to address them. This variety, therefore, is best thought of as falling on a continuum: on the one end are more liberal-oriented organizations that works within formal government channels; and on the other end are more radical organizations that are openly critical of the government and working towards community sovereignty (for more on this see Myers and Goddard 2015). Given this, this third category of social justice organizations should be thought of as being functionally similar to one another, though we are uneasy to include the liberal organizations with the radical ones under one umbrella.

As with the other two types of social justice organizations, we see ways that progressive criminologists could work with these advocacy organizations. Our recommendations echo those previously mentioned, such as distributing research summaries to organizations on the issues they are working on. Not surprisingly, many of the organizations' demands for change involve the 'War on Drugs'. Therefore, criminologists might disseminate what we know about things such as: what happens when countries de-criminalize drug possession; research on drug forfeitures; and research on how much federal funding contributes to the War on Drugs, including the transfer of military equipment to local law enforcement. We could also disseminate research on the relationship between the perceived legitimacy of the law and crime rates (Sherman 1993). Or we could provide a synthesis of research about the positive impact that procedural fairness or civic and economic reintegration has on recidivism, thus giving scientific support to reforms such as reducing barriers to employment, education, housing, voting, jury duty, licenses and public benefits for people with criminal records.

More generally, the first and most important step is to discern whether an interest to collaborate exists, and then proceed from there. If interest exists, the next step would be to have open discussions with the groups, coming up with a plan for collaboration, figuring out what tools we have that an organization might want to use. All the while, we need to proceed in a way that does not inadvertently result in us co-opting their agendas or tainting their vision; as relationships are being forged, therefore, it might make sense for criminologists to function in more of a supportive role, taking the lead on some things when asked. Without open lines of communication, without first getting to know these organizations, it is difficult to provide more precise guidance because we (in criminology) just do not know what these organizations want, and we certainly do not want to assume what they need.

Again, advocacy organizations do not always want (or need) our assistance. As was noted in one community-driven research report: 'Our research report privileges engagement of those who are directly impacted by an issue or policy to determine how the given issue is studied' (Justice for Families 2012: 50). In other words, grassroots organizations tend to be self-reliant and favor the kind of study 'that elevates community expertise' (Data Center Research for Justice 2015). Some organizations see their research as 'decolonizing knowledge' and would be extremely skeptical about potential partnerships (for related discussions see Dupont 2008; Cunneen and Rowe 2014; Rynne and Cassematis 2015). Therefore, we might simply ask what we could do to help and leave it to them to suggest what to do, which might include leaving immediately.

Still, many organizations want partnerships, and we as scholars can make an impact, whether it is evaluation research or providing research support. Not all organizations would be open to all types of research; nor would all progressive criminologists feel comfortable partnering with all organizations. It is important for criminologists to enter such partnerships with their eyes wide open to potential pitfalls. Engaging with these organizations, if done seriously, will take a lot of time and effort from scholars, and such partnerships will not always pay off, especially since organizations will vary considerably in their own capacities. Many organizations, even if open to collaboration, may not be easy to partner with, and there is no guarantee that engaging with them will lead to real and lasting change. As Michelle Alexander (2010) argues, however, it will take a social movement composed of different races, classes and political orientations to upend mass incarceration. We believe that these social justice organizations will be vital in harnessing the current energies towards that end and that progressive criminology can play a role in these efforts and others (see also Belknap 2015).

## Conclusion

The organizations discussed in this article exemplify a decade-long grassroots movement in the US, one which aims to raise public consciousness about the connections between mass incarceration and earlier forms of social control, confront its direct and collateral human consequences, and build less harm-filled alternatives to 'justice as usual' for disempowered young people. While it is impossible to attribute the source of the current protests in New York City, St Louis, Baltimore, Los Angeles and other major US cities to the work of these organizations, there are good reasons to believe they played at least some role. They have often called for, publicized and actively participated in these protests and have worked with thousands of young people on these issues for years. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that they will play a part in increasing the chance that the current energies feed into real and lasting changes, and not simply fade away as news outlets tire of the protests. Organizations continue to protest at the moment of this writing. For example, the Youth Justice Coalition recently marched and delivered 617 coffins to the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors and District Attorney in protest of the 617 people that (they estimate) have been killed by Los Angeles Police Department since 2000. Moreover, social justice organizations will be important for helping to make sure that people living in communities where issues of crime and punishment are daily realities *drive the change*. For these reasons, these organizations should be important (potential) partners for progressive criminologists. Whether as direct partners, allies, or in some other relationship, we have tried to spell out several concrete ways that those partnerships could occur.

While we have focused on the United States, similar disparities (and counter-movements) exist elsewhere. Research finds an overrepresentation of Indigenous people incarcerated in Australia (Jeffries and Bond 2012; White 2014). In Canada, Aboriginal youth are over-represented in the correctional system as well. In 2010-11, in the provinces that provided data, Aboriginal youth represented 26 per cent of those sent to custodial facilities and enrolled in community supervision even though they represented only about six per cent of the total youth population in those same jurisdictions (Munch 2012; see also Corrado, Kuehn and Margaritescu 2014). In

Europe, immigrants and foreign-born people suffer the brunt of incarceration. With an immigrant incarceration rate of 443 per 100,000, 'foreigners are imprisoned on average 6.2 times more often than EU citizens, with some countries (e.g. Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Greece) incarcerating immigrants up to 10 times more often than nationals ...' (De Giorgi 2010: 155). Much like the US, being Black in the UK exponentially increases the likelihood of being stopped and searched (Hurrell 2013). Thus, the racial or ethnic disparities in the US criminal justice system are extreme in scale, but not in kind.

The human consequences of this two-track justice system – one for White and well-off (young) people and another for poor youth, mainly of color (Reiman and Leighton 2010) – are at this moment being protested and discussed across the globe. Many of these protests, similar to the US case, have been brought about by high profile cases of police violence or alleged misconduct. For instance, in Australia two high profile deaths of Indigenous people while in police custody recently sparked public protest: one of these was the death of a 22 year old young woman while in police custody (where she was being held for unpaid parking tickets), and the other involved a 31 year old man who died while in prison (Palet 2015). Similar to the US, social justice organizations in Australia are mobilizing against their criminal justice system, including ANTaR (headquarters in Sydney), the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (Sydney) and Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Services (Alice Spring and Tennant Creek, Northern Territory). Other advocacy organizations include the National Association for Youth Justice (London) and the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (Belfast).

Not only are social justice organizations at work around the globe but many are thinking globally as well, working to bring consciousness to carceral and economic issues that penetrate the lives of young people around the world. This is extremely important given how interconnected and similar oppressions are in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Across the globe young people are experiencing increased precariousness in employment, while state support systems shrink and prison systems bloat under neo-liberalism, a carceral expansion mainly fueled by the increased criminalization of poor youth, predominantly of color. While their importance should not be overstated or romanticized, organizations like those described here may provide an important point of partnership for progressive criminologists of varying stripes who care about these issues in the US and beyond.

*Correspondence:* Tim Goddard, Assistant Professor, Department of Criminal Justice, Florida International University, 11200 SW 8th Street, PCA 256 Miami, Florida 33199, USA. Email: [tgoddard@fiu.edu](mailto:tgoddard@fiu.edu)

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